# ‘Christianity and food’

**Cooking, food preparation, and eating—Christianity**

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Introduction

Food preparation, cooking, and eating are regulated less formally in Christianity than in other religions, such as Judaism and Islam. Although it is not generally possible to identify Christian ethical rules governing specific procedures and practices, teaching and wisdom offer extensive guidance. Key sources include scripture, tradition, and monastic rules. In this contribution, I shall first situate Christian teaching in the context of the distinct imperatives of the Old and New Testaments. The Christian preference for simple diet and preparatory methods will then be discussed, followed by the high valuation of the task of cooking in monastic rules, and Christian influences on specific dietary options and recipes. Finally, I shall consider how flexibility and rules have each played a part in shaping the choices of Christian diners.

The two testaments: change and continuity

In the Christian communities of the New Testament the status of the Jewish law, received from God by Moses, was debated extensively. In this law, rules governing food preparation were prominent. This debate became acute as Paul's mission to the Gentiles began. (Gentiles were non-Jews who had not previously followed the Jewish law.) Jesus' teaching seemed to suggest that some parts of that law no longer applied, or did not apply to Gentiles (Mt. 11.25-30, 23,13-28; Mk 7.14-23; Lk. 10.29-37, 18.9-14, Jn 1.14-18). Yet Jesus also presented himself as not abolishing the Jewish law but fulfilling it (Mt. 15.17-20, Lk. 16.16-18, Jn 5.45-7). In view of this apparently contradictory teaching, did Gentile converts to Christianity need to observe the full requirements of the Mosaic law relating to food preparation, especially as laid down in the Old Testament books Leviticus and Deuteronomy? At the Council of Jerusalem a compromise was reached in which all Christians were urged to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from the flesh of living beings killed by strangulation (Acts 15.29). Christians were therefore expected to continue some Jewish meat preparation practices. Other Jewish customs could, by implication, be discontinued, such as the requirement not to mix milk and meat (Ex. 23.19b).

Isolated attempts have been made to reinstitute aspects of the Mosaic law relating to food preparation, notably in Celtic Ireland in the seventh through ninth centuries and in other regions under the influence of Eastern Orthodox Christian missions (Grumett 2008). Yet in subsequent Christian history, even the minimal expectations articulated at the Jerusalem Council were mostly

ignored. Nevertheless, a significant strand of teaching censures elaborate methods of food preparation and cooking, associating these with the sin of gluttony and urging Christians to adopt simple methods. The classic understanding of gluttony encompassed a considerably wider range of activities than is generally assumed today (Miller 1997). Gluttony was not simply, nor even primarily, the sin of consuming excessive quantities of food. As Thomas Aquinas taught, gluttony included the sin of eating food that was too costly or difficult to prepare, as well as the sin of eating too early or too quickly (*Summa theologiae* II.2, q. 148, a. 4, *resp*.).

## A simple diet

In his fourth-century monastic teaching, Basil of Caesarea promotes a simple diet employing ingredients that are available locally. He counsels:

> We ought to choose for our own use whatever is more easily and cheaply obtained in each locality and available for common use and bring in from a distance only those things which are more necessary for life, such as oil and the like or if something is appropriate for the necessary relief of the sick—yet even this only if it can be obtained without fuss and disturbance and distraction. (*Longer Responses* 19)

Basil here recognizes that, in monasteries, gluttony could become an acute temptation. Although monasteries were traditionally strictly ascetic, economies of scale made it possible for their members to obtain foods and employ preparation methods unavailable to the wider populace.

Christians have promoted simplicity in cooking as well as in food sourcing and preparation, with ascetics subverting the traditional hierarchy described by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) that assigns cooked food a higher status than raw food (Twigg 1983, 1979). The desert fathers were noteworthy in this regard. These hermits lived apart from society in the early centuries of Christianity in order to pursue a life of prayer and self-denial. In their *Lives* (1981), the desert fathers are presented as subsisting on very small quantities of roots, leaves, herbs, pulses, seeds, and olives. In Palestine and Syria an especially strict group, known as “grazers,” ate only grass, sometimes alongside wild animals. Most of these simple foods have been classed by humoral theorists like Aristotle, Galen, and Albert the Great as “cold” and “dry,” in contrast with the “hot” and “moist” dishes that would typically be produced though cookery. “Hot” and “moist” dishes, especially cooked meat, were seen as warming the body and leading it into temptations, above all into sexual temptations, whereas “cold” and “dry” foods, such as raw vegetables, were believed to maintain the body in a state of physical purity and spiritual discipline.

These theories were promoted by many early Christian authorities such as Jerome and Basil of Ancyra. They were revived by nineteenth-century health reformers, many of whom were prominent Christians. In 1829, Dr Sylvester Graham, the Presbyterian minister and temperance lecturer, invented the cracker biscuit that bore his name. This tasted like a digestive biscuit and had a similar consistency, as well as a dryness intended to curb sexual urges. At the start of the twentieth century, the Kellogg brothers and other Christian entrepreneurs pioneered breakfast cereals and other meat substitutes such as peanut butter in order to wean Americans off their pork, beans, and pie breakfasts (Carson 1959). John Harvey Kellogg and William Keith Kellogg were Seventh Day Adventists based at the church's Battle Creek Sanatorium in Michigan. The Christian context of some breakfast products was proclaimed by their names, which included Food of Eden, Golden Manna, and even Elijah's Manna. Today breakfast remains the daily meal most deeply impacted by Christian dietary ideals, in both its generally raw ingredients and simple preparation.

Although mainstream Christianity has obviously not viewed all cooking negatively, a concern to avoid unnecessary cooking has persisted. This is well-expressed by Clement of Alexandria, who in his *Instructor*, written around 200, commends "simple, truly plain" food that ministers to "life, not to luxury" (ch. 2.i). Such food, he continues, is "conducive both to digestion and lightness of body, from which come growth, and health, and right strength." Clement attacks a range of elaborate food preparation methods, including pastry making, and condemns consumers of elaborate dishes as "gluttons, surrounded with the sound of hissing frying pans" who wear their "whole life away at the pestle and mortar." These comments suggest that, if raw items are edible and in sufficient supply, they should be preferred to cooked dishes .

One of Clement's complaints is against cooks who "emasculate plain food, namely bread, by straining off the nourishing part of the grain, so that the necessary part of food becomes matter of reproach to luxury." This critique of white bread re-emerged in the nineteenth-century health reform movement. Sylvester Graham, previously mentioned, regarded white bread as nutritionally deficient, promoting in its place brown bread made with his own brand of wholemeal flour, which contained coarsely-ground bran and germ. By commercial means such as these, choices about recipes and preparation methods gained renewed theological significance, being marketed as part of an embodied spiritual discipline. Bodily health was widely viewed as indicative of spiritual health and even of personal salvation.

The criticisms of both early Christian writers and much later Christian health reformers were directed primarily against meat, which usually had to be cooked before it could be eaten. Part of the reason that cooking could historically be regarded as a superfluous activity was that levels of meat-eating were generally low, certainly when compared with current levels in the West. Yet beyond

monastery walls, abstention from meat was not the norm at all times. Feasts marked important points in the Christian year, especially Easter and Christmas, and good cooking, including of meat dishes, helped to make them special. Indeed, Jesus himself cooked and ate fish after his Resurrection, in the presence of several disciples (Jn 21.9-13). This suggests that cooking should in principle be viewed positively, providing its results are not unnecessarily luxurious nor the preparation process needlessly time-consuming.

Cooking and recipes

In the rules of some monastic communities, cooking is regarded as a sacred commission. In the *Rule of Benedict*, composed around 540, the cellarer, who functioned similarly to a bursar, is exhorted to "look upon all the utensils of the monastery and its whole property as upon the sacred vessels of the altar" (ch. 31). This ethic of culinary care is confirmed in the eighth-century *Longer Rule for Canons* composed by Chrodegang of Metz, in which the cooks are to be "selected from the most faithful members of the household of the church, and be carefully trained to their work, so that they may be capable of attending to the needs of the brethren appropriately, both by their skill at cooking and by their pure faith." (ch. 11)

This view of cooking as a sacred charge is clearest in some of the practices surrounding the manufacture of the leavened bread used in the Eucharist. In many ancient traditions this bread was required to be prepared in silence, or by priests, or while specific psalms were chanted, or while special clothing was worn (Galavaris 1970). In some places the bread had to be baked in church, with an oven available for this purpose. In any case, the bread was expected to be of high quality, made with finely-ground sifted flour, and usually had to be baked on the day on which it was offered. In his *Lausiac History*, Palladius describes the hermit Candida rising at night to grind corn, light the oven, and bake the loaf for the morning Eucharist (ch. 57). The leaven, which was reserved from the previous batch of dough, was seen as testament to a church's continuing eucharistic tradition. In some churches it was even traced back to a portion associated with Jesus or one of his apostles.

The seasonal prohibitions of specific foodstuffs discussed earlier have influenced the development of recipes that remain popular today. The most important such season has been Lent, lasting about six weeks, when red meat, poultry, dairy products, and eggs were historically banned by both church and state. Pancakes and recipes involving the frying or roasting of pieces of meat are made in many countries during Shrovetide or Carnival, the period immediately before the start of Lent. Although Mothering Sunday, which falls around the middle of Lent, was a time for relaxation and family gatherings, food prohibitions nevertheless continued. To provide a suitable treat without employing any banned ingredients, dried fruit and nuts could be used with marzipan (made from

almonds, the standard milk substitute), yeast, and saffron to produce Simnel cake. Hot cross buns were baked on Good Friday, although after the Reformation Protestants viewed these with suspicion because of their associations with the eucharistic bread, which Catholics reserved on the previous day. Easter eggs, which originally were hardboiled decorated eggs, were exchanged at the end of Lent. This was because, once the ban on egg consumption ended, they were available in abundance.

Fish cookery has been indirectly promoted by Christian bans on the consumption of red meat that applied across society during Lent and on regular days of abstinence such as Fridays, as well as throughout the year in most medieval monasteries (Grumett 2011). These monasteries were well-known for their lavish fish cookery, and frequently criticized for it by those who viewed such cookery as incompatible with the spirit of monastic simplicity. The custom of serving fish on Fridays continues today in many restaurants and refectories.

Medieval monasteries also played an important role in brewing, winemaking, and the distillation of spirits, as evidenced today by the names of many alcoholic drinks and producers. Alcohol, unlike meat, was not banned in monasteries. Although John Wesley, who founded Methodism, condemned distilled spirits, general prohibitions of alcohol under Christian influence were rare before the temperance movement of the later nineteenth century (Fuller 1996).

Eating: flexibility, rules, and choices

Meals comprise a central strand of the biblical narrative about Jesus. It is notable that a meal, the Last Supper, is Jesus' final act of fellowship with his disciples. All four Gospels include an account of Jesus presiding at this meal (Mt. 26.20-9, Mk 14.17-25, Lk. 22.14-38, Jn 13.2b-17.26). In John's account, moreover, this meal is an occasion when Jesus tells his disciples much about himself and his destiny. In Luke's Gospel, furthermore, after his Resurrection Jesus reveals himself to some of his disciples in the breaking of bread (24.30-1). (This breaking was the prerogative of the host and a standard part of any meal.) Paul provides the first account of a Christian Eucharist, presenting it as a memorial and proclamation of Jesus at which bread and wine are consumed (1 Cor. 11.23-6).

Jesus was a guest at many meals in the course of his ministry, and was frequently criticized for accepting invitations to the tables of tax collectors and sinners (e.g. Mt. 11.19). His example promotes a flexible approach to dining and is developed by Paul (Rom. 14.1–15.13; 1 Cor. 8–11.1). For the reasons discussed at the beginning of this entry, however, flexibility did not entail complete freedom. Rather, Paul taught that choices about accepting hospitality and the foods offered should be made with a view to the effects of those choices on other people, whether Christians, Jews, or Gentiles, and on the Christian mission. For instance, unrestricted consumption would likely offend potential Jewish converts, just as excessive strictness might deter Gentiles. A well-known figure from

much later in Christian history, who acted similarly to Jesus, is Francis of Assisi, who in 1210 founded the Franciscan order. Although Francis' preference was to avoid meat, he was not completely vegetarian, because this would have impeded his ability to share the life of the people around him. This included being a guest at meals, at which meat would sometimes be served (Grumett 2007).

The Gospels recount many shared meals, and dining together in a single room became the norm in monastic communities, as reflected in their written rules. In the *Rules of Pachomius*, composed in about 320, special care is taken to prevent eating in any other location. It is stipulated that no food be taken from the community's garden, fields, or orchard for personal consumption, nor stored privately (chs 71-80). These rules applied even to windfall fruit. From then onwards, monasteries had a refectory in which meals would be taken in common and in which the dining rules were enforced. As monasteries grew larger, however, other dining areas were created in which the rules were deemed either not to apply, or to apply less strictly.

At least as significant as the location in which meals were taken was the time of eating. In the fifth-century *Rule of Saint Augustine*, adopted by the Dominican order, the main meal was delayed until late in the afternoon, although monks and nuns who were unable to fast for that long were permitted to take some food around midday (ch. 3.1). In the later *Rule of Benedict*, the time of the main meal, which was the first meal of the day, varied according to the season. For example, during Eastertide it was taken at midday ("the sixth hour") and followed by supper, whereas in the penitential season of Lent it was delayed until evening (ch. 41). On most other days it could be taken at around 3 p.m. ("the ninth hour"). The principle of delaying the first and often only meal of the day in order to fast was standard monastic discipline, but in recent decades has found very few advocates (although see De Vogüé 1989).

In monasteries and convents, although dining was communal, speaking during meals was prohibited. Requests for food or utensils were communicated via a simple system of sign language (Ambrose 2006). At some meals, diners listened to readings from scripture or other edifying texts, or to extracts from their rule. This left them free to meditate and eat their food thankfully.

Even in the relatively strict monastic dining context a choice of dishes was permitted. The *Rule of Benedict* allowed monks to choose between "two cooked dishes, on account of individual infirmities, so that he who perchance cannot eat of the one, may make his meal of the other" (ch. 39). The *Rule of the Master*, compiled shortly before that of Benedict, unusually allowed meat to be eaten at the Easter and Christmas feasts by those who wished. But this choice was presented in such a way as to discourage the meat option. The rule states:

> Let those brethren of a deanery who are going to eat meat be seated beside one another at their own tables, and let the specially cooked meat courses be brought to them in separate dishes, lest the purity of the abstainers seem to be sullied, and in order that the eaters may notice how great the distance is between them, those who cater to their desires and those who master the stomach. (ch. 53)

Moreover, the Master advises in the same chapter that, when the feast approaches, the monks be guided in their choice and encouraged to join the abstainers' table.

In the later medieval period, monastic gluttony was frequently the object of wider public criticism. Interestingly, similar criticisms of conventual practice are much rarer, suggesting that nuns were more likely to observe the spirit of their rule than monks. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which were written in the late fourteenth century, for example, the monk's favourite meat is roasted swan, suggestive of lavish expense as well as pride and sloth, while the summoner enjoys garlic, onion, and leeks, which were often believed to possess aphrodisiacal properties. The good widow of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, in contrast, lives simply, drinking no wine and eating milk and brown bread (Biebel 1998).

It is significant that the decline in monastic dietary discipline was associated with a move away from common dining in a single place at a fixed time. In the modern world, traditions of common family dining are threatened by the rapid growth and spread of mass fast food culture (Grumett, Bretherton, and Holmes 2011). Yet from the perspective of a Judaeo-Christian theology of creation, food is a gift from God to humankind that is, as such, given within boundaries and with limitations (Gen. 1.29). A misplaced desire to consume food and to have food accepted by God lies at the root of the two great primordial biblical sins: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden after they tasted the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3), and the murder of Abel by his brother Cain after God's rejection of the latter's vegetal offering (Gen. 4.1-16). This sinful nexus of consumption, estrangement, and annihilation contrasts starkly with the sabbath rest into which God calls all people (Ex. 20.8-11), in which waiting and the taking of time allow lives to be shaped by principles other than consumption.

## Conclusion

Although the expectations surrounding food preparation, cookery, and eating are less clearly codified in Christianity than in many other religious, traditions of practice and interpretation with ethical relevance can nonetheless be identified. These emerge from Old Testament legislation, its interpretation in light of the teaching of Jesus, and the subsequent codification of both by churches

and monastic founders. The ingredients and preparation techniques employed should both be simple. For this reason, local sourcing of ingredients is desirable and foodstuffs that may be eaten raw should normally be preferred where practicable, as part of a balanced diet suitable for the individual. Moreover, particular seasons and days of abstinence are part of Christian tradition. Preparing the dishes associated with them is one way of engaging present-day Christians with the dietary history of their faith, and via that history, with their faith's cycle of feasts and fasts, its scripture, and its doctrines.

Such principles have wider relevance. The renewal of interest in monastic wisdom and mindful practice that is evident beyond the boundaries of institutional Christianity suggests that Christian traditions of food preparation, cooking, and eating have continued relevance for wider society. Indeed, by giving such features of their religion greater prominence, Christians might demonstrate a more embodied and rooted faith that appeals to people who are currently searching for enlightenment elsewhere.

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